

AMENDMENTS TO THE CLAIMS

The following listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application:

Listing of Claims:

1. (Currently Amended) A caterpillar casting method for a continuous fabrication of billets and bands of metallic or non-metallic materials comprising the step of: wherein

~~casting is carried out in~~ a casting mold which is formed by blocks (4) which circulate caterpillar-like on a transport means around a casting caterpillar (2;3) and are held at least on a portion t of the circulation path U, where they would fall off said transport means due to gravity, on said transport means by means of stationarily fixed magnets.

2. (Previously Presented) A casting method as claimed in claim 1, wherein the mold comprises an upper and a lower casting caterpillar (2;3).

3. (Previously Presented) A casting method as claimed in claim 1, wherein the ratio between the portion t on which the blocks (4) are held on the transport means by means of stationary magnets and the total circulation path U of the at least one casting caterpillar (2;3), $t : U$, is between 0.55 and 0.95.

4. (Currently Amended) A casting machine (1) for carrying out the method as claimed in claim 1, wherein the continuous fabrication of billets and bands of metallic and non-metallic materials is done with a mold in which at least one wall consists of blocks (5) which circulate caterpillar-like around at least one casting caterpillar (2;3), whereby the blocks (4) lay loosely on a transport means, ~~preferably a chain (20)~~, so that upon temperature changes they may be deformed in all directions, said blocks being pulled at least on a portion of the circulation path of the at least one casting caterpillar (2;3) by means of stationary magnets against tracks (31) and guided by the transport means so that the blocks (4) are movable in a contactless manner over the stationary magnets.

5. (Currently Amended) A casting machine (1) as claimed in claim 4, wherein the magnets are permanent magnets or ~~preferably~~ electromagnets.

6. (Cancelled)

7. (Currently Amended) A casting machine (1) as claimed in claim 4, wherein

A) the blocks (4) extending over the width of the mold consist, in the lateral direction, of several block elements (5) which are positioned in frames made of a ferromagnetic material (7) and are ~~preferably~~ held together by means of drawbars (16) provided with tension springs (15) in such a way that, upon temperature changes occurring during the casting process, they may be freely deformed;

B) the blocks (4) put together by means of the frames (7) rest on the casting caterpillars (2;3) as a unit ~~and without any mechanical fixation~~,

C) at least one stationary magnetic rail (12) being arranged between tracks (11) of the transport means and the ~~bottom surface~~ mold section at the lower path of the at least one casting caterpillar (2;3) and at least one stationary magnetic bow (13) being arranged on the entry side and on the exit side (19a;19b) of the mold, by which the frames (7) carrying the block elements (5) are pulled onto the tracks (11) by means of the transport means and are guided thereon in such a way that the frames (7) are movable in a contactless manner over the stationary magnetic rails (12) and magnetic bows (13).

8. (Currently Amended) A casting machine (1) as claimed in claim 7, wherein over the width of the mold several transport means, ~~preferably chains (20)~~ are arranged, the lateral distance ("j") therebetween being such that any undue bending of the frames (7) placed on the transport means and thus of the composite blocks (4) extending over the width of the mold is avoided, so that due to the low degree of deformation of the block elements (5) and to their maintained, planar position within the frames (7) the walls of the mold, disregarding its length and its width, remain practically even, in spite of the heating of the blocks (4).

9. (Previously Presented) A casting machine (1) as claimed in claim 4, wherein at least on a portion of a top surface of machine bodies, the blocks (4) lie free on the transport means (20) and can be removed and replaced without any additional expenditure in time and labor in the course of an exchange operation carried out by means of hoisting equipment, provided with an adequate gripper.

10. (Previously Presented) A casting machine (1) as claimed in claim 7, wherein the frames (7) are made of a ferromagnetic material.

11. (Previously Presented) A casting machine (1) as claimed claim 4, wherein the transport means are chains (20).

12. (Previously Presented) A casting machine (1) as claimed in claim 4, wherein the transport means are provided with rollers (10).

13. (Previously Presented) A casting machine (1) as claimed in claim 7, wherein the length of the block elements (5), as measured in the lateral direction, is 25 cm ("h") at the most.

14. (Previously Presented) A casting machine (1) as claimed in claim 7, wherein the distance between the transport means carrying the frames (7) is 30 cm ("j") at the most.

15. (Currently Amended) A casting machine (1) as claimed in claim 4, wherein the casting machine has a horizontal or a slightly inclined casting direction and comprises a lower casting caterpillar (3) and an upper casting caterpillar (2), the lower casting caterpillar (3) having a length ("k") and the upper casting caterpillar (2) having a shorter length ("l") and being disposed in such a way that at an exit side of the mold, the lower casting caterpillar (3) juts out with respect to the upper casting caterpillar (2), thus making it possible to exchange also the blocks (4) of the lower

~~casting caterpillar (3) in an analogous manner to those of the upper casting caterpillar (2) without any hindrance by gradually moving them onto said extended portion.~~

16. (Previously Presented) A casting machine (1) as claimed in claim 15, wherein

a) the two casting caterpillars (2;3) each comprise two shafts

(29a;29b;29c;29d) having concentrically fixed chain wheels (30);

b) the magnetic bows (13) being positioned by means of plain bearings or rolling bearings (28) on the rotating shafts (29) of the chain wheels (30), which makes it possible to ensure the required concentricity of the magnetic bows (13) with the track (11) of the transport means, as well as the precise position of these parts with respect to the machine bodies.

17. (Cancelled)

18. (Previously Presented) A casting machine (1) as claimed in claim 7, wherein the blocks (4) have a rear surface facing the tracks (11) and that a cooling appliance for said rear surface of the blocks (4) is provided.

19. (Currently Amended) A casting machine (1) as claimed in claim 4, wherein the blocks (4) have a front surface which forms the wall of the mold and which is provided with a heat-insulating protective layer, ~~preferably~~ made of a ceramic material.

20. (Currently Amended) A casting machine (1) as claimed in claim 4, wherein the blocks (4) have a front surface which forms the wall of the mold and which is provided with a wear-resistant protective layer, ~~preferably made of a ceramic material.~~

21. (Currently Amended) A casting machine (1) as claimed in claim 4, wherein the blocks (4) have a front surface which forms the wall of the mold and which is provided with a film made of titanium or steel and/or its alloys, ~~preferably with a thickness of less than 0.5 mm.~~

22. (Currently Amended) A casting machine (1) as claimed in claim 4, wherein a cooling appliance for the blocks (4) is provided which comprises a plurality of nozzles (9) that are oriented in such a way that coolant jets (34) impart an impulsion in, or if necessary against, a casting direction to the blocks (4), ~~depending on the most advantageous casting direction, which is imposed by the type of casting process used, in order to optimise in this way the clamping force between the successive rows of blocks.~~

23. (Currently Amended) A casting machine (1) as claimed in claim 16, wherein the casting machine comprises a drive for the blocks (4) which is provided on the upper casting caterpillar (2) on the exit side (19b) of the mould, an angular ~~momentum~~moment against the direction of rotation being imparted to the shaft (29a) on an entry side (19a).

24. (Previously Presented) A casting machine (1) as claimed in claim 16, wherein the casting machine comprises a drive for the blocks (4) which is provided on the lower casting caterpillar (3) on an entry side (19a) of the mold and that an adequate antitorque moment is imparted to the shaft (29d) disposed on the exit side (19b) and supporting the chain wheels (30), so that in the region of the mold the block rows abut on each other and thus come to lie tightly against one another.

25. (Currently Amended) A casting machine (1) as claimed in claim 11, wherein each chain (20) has chain links (26) connected to one another by means of joints, said joints being provided with a clearance extending in a longitudinal direction so that the pitch of the chains (20) may adapt itself to the dimensions of the blocks (4), both in their cold state and in their heated condition on passing through the mold, ~~and to the toothing of chain wheels (30).~~

26. (Previously Presented) A casting machine (1) as claimed in claim 22, wherein the blocks (4) are offset in their frames (7), so that any interspace arising between the blocks (4) is bridged, and thus the coolant will be prevented from passing onto the front surface of the blocks (4) forming the wall of the mould.

27. (Previously Presented) A casting machine (1) as claimed in claim 25, wherein the chain links (26) have a toothing which engages with the frames (7) of the blocks (4) so that the position of the latter on the circulating transport means is defined and secured.

28. (Previously Presented) A method of exchanging the blocks (4) of a casting machine as claimed in claim 4, wherein a plate suspended on a hoisting equipment, provided on its bottom surface with sealings and connected to a vacuum system is let down on the blocks (4) to be exchanged, whereupon the vacuum system is activated so that the blocks (4) are aspirated by the plate and can thus be replaced in a small fraction of the expenditure in time and labour which has so far been necessary for this operation.